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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 003494

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL AF  
SUBJECT: FIRST REACTIONS TO ABDULLAH'S ANNOUNCEMENT: RELIEF

REF: KABUL 3493

Classified By: PolCouns Annie Pforzheimer reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: While many Afghan interlocutors are glad that the long and tumultuous 2009 Presidential elections process might be over, the political classes apparently have not given up their deal-making. The night of his November 1 press conference withdrawing from the race, Dr. Abdullah had dinner with Ambassador Eikenberry where he showed some of the strong emotions of the day, noting his "relief", then gradually relaxed into a conversation on his strategy for the next few years. In a Karzai meeting with jihadi and mujahadeen leaders the morning of November 2, five of eight voted to have the IEC announce that Karzai was the election winner, which transpired at 4 PM (reftel). Abdullah supporters expressed mixed feelings about his carefully worded announcement, some pushing for a boycott, others an interim government and a refusal of the IEC announcement, while still others are hoping for a Professor Rabbani negotiated deal with Karzai. End Summary.

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ABDULLAH RELIEVED, BUT UNDECIDED?  
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¶2. (S) The night of his November 1 press conference, Dr. Abdullah and one aide had dinner with Ambassador Eikenberry before he began another round of meetings with supporters starting at 9 pm. Abdullah showed some of the strong emotions of the day when he arrived, talking about his "relief", but gradually relaxed into a conversation on his strategy for the next few years. Abdullah spoke at length about his motivations for both his run and subsequent withdrawal, blaming his final decision to withdraw on Karzai who denied even one, symbolic change to the IEC (firing IEC Chairman Ludin) that could easily have been accomplished during the short second-round campaign period. Abdullah said that his other reason for withdrawing was the growing ethnicized nature of the rhetoric being used to get out the Pashtun vote. He noted that the vast majority of his supporters had wanted a "boycott" but he decided, at the last minute, to avoid that term.

¶3. (S) Looking ahead, Abdullah's contribution to greater governance and institutionalization of democracy is for now fairly vague - he is not clear whether he wants a "national movement", a political party, or just influence in Parliament. He agreed with the Ambassador that extending the central government to the provinces, districts and villages was extremely important but pointed out that, in the absence of effective government an alternative power network had grown into being - one that featured drug traffickers, petty warlords, terrorists and corrupt officials.

¶4. (S) As of November 2, however, there were some indications that Abdullah is considering a statement that would condemn the November 2 IEC certification of Karzai's election. Such a move would open the door to a legal challenge, which would

derail his status of loyal opposition.

¶15. (S) Some members of Abdullah's campaign, in particular those without strong allegiances to Rabbani, continue to hope for more of a challenge to Karzai. They expressed their hope that the IEC decision will be challenged on legal grounds by the IC as well as Afghans such as Abdullah, leading (somehow) to an interim administration and the holding of a second round in the spring. They explained that this is the reason why Abdullah has refused to give the IEC his decision to withdraw in writing.

¶16. (S) According to a leading Shomali commander aligned with the Northern Alliance, Amanullah Guzar, Abdullah's decision to withdraw was not his own, but that of his supporters who are fed up with Karzai's corrupt and ineffective government and who believe that fraud would be a bigger problem in any second round. He said that Afghans are thankful for U.S. efforts to deal with the fraud and want to see additional pressure applied to Karzai to step down to make room for an interim administration, selected by the U.S. and the international community (but not to be led by Zalmay Khalilzad) that would be elected in the spring with the parliament. Karzai would be allowed to run, but would be without the advantages of the presidency he abused in the first round. Guzar, who appeared agitated during much of the meeting, said that if Karzai remained there would be violence which Abdullah would be powerless to prevent and which could eventually engulf foreign forces.

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STILL, A DEAL?

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¶17. (S) However, while Guzar said that he and the other commanders prefer to see a Karzai-less interim administration with elections next year they are willing to accept another Karzai term in return for a certain number of positions in the government. This position would be based on the Rabbani list handed to Karzai before the election. Guzar said this would be a "poisonous pill" for them to swallow, but that they would do it for the good of the country.

¶18. (S) Tajik and reluctant Karzai-supporter MP Fazel Aimaq told us many Abdullah supporters were "disappointed" with Abdullah's announcement to not participate in the second round, in particular because many of them had spent considerable personal funds on the campaign, as well as taken personal risk. They asked, if Abdullah was going to concede, why did he wait so long to do it? Director of the Afghanistan Center for Research and Policy Haroun Mir, largely viewed as anti-Karzai, told us that many high profile Abdullah supporters, to include Professor Rabbani, would use the question of Karzai's legitimacy as leverage to obtain positions in Karzai's government or to push for an interim government. Salahuddin Rabbani told us that Rabbani supported the "middle of the road" Abdullah announcement that neither called for a boycott, nor offered a silent withdrawal. He admitted "other supporters," wanted a full boycott, but that they agreed this was dangerous, also noting that both Rabbani and Abdullah did not want to upset the IC, nor burn their bridges with Karzai.

¶19. (S) Professor Rabbani's son Salahuddin Rabbani told Poloff that the "door still remained open" for a deal with Karzai. He said Karzai had passed Professor Rabbani a note on November 1 listing supporters he was offering jobs, to include Salahuddin. Professor Rabbani refused, saying that they were advocating for policy changes, not just jobs, to include a decentralization of the government. Salahuddin said that they thought these Karzai maneuvers were a transparent attempt to divide the Abdullah team. However, he said Karzai should reach out to his father. Poloff told him that we would not oppose such negotiations but that any calls

for a boycott would be dangerous. Since Karzai has indicated to intermediaries that he will offer "something" to Abdullah and his supporters once his reelection is confirmed, the Rabbani camp tells us they are cautiously optimistic about their prospects.

¶10. (S) MP Aimaq told us that Abdullah's ambitions were personal fame, not power. Therefore, he preferred to keep the press and the IC on his side. He said Abdullah would never accept a deal with Karzai, as he would demand an equal partnership, not a position that Karzai could later withdraw, as he did to Abdullah when he was Foreign Minister. Junbesh MP Shakar Kargar told us that Rabbani was Abdullah's "scorpion under the rug," who was manipulating him and hoping to make Abdullah lose face, in order to set Rabbani up for positions in a Karzai government. MP Haji Iqbal (Kapisa, Tajik) told us many Abdullah supporters had already abandoned Abdullah in favor of a Rabbani deal with Karzai. (Note: we have heard that these supporters, at a minimum, want to be reimbursed for their Abdullah campaign expenses. End Note.) Iqbal said Abdullah, as the face out front, could never benefit from an important position. Kargar further said Abdullah was the Tajik "sacrificial lamb," who served to path the way for the next Tajik candidate in the 2014 presidential race.

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KARZAI PLEASED  
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¶11. (S) Ambassadors Eikenberry and Ricciardone were with President Karzai during the Abdullah press conference November 1. Overall, Karzai's team reacted favorably to Abdullah's tone and to the fact that he avoided the word boycott, and termed the speech not "overly confrontational." At that meeting Ambassador Eikenberry emphasized his understanding for the need for both constitutional legitimacy and political legitimacy, and hoped that the IEC would shortly come to a conclusion. Karzai, oddly, questioned the Ambassadors directly if they had been financially supporting Abdullah's campaign. When they denied it, Karzai said, "well, if you are not paying him, that proves the Iranians are."

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SOME KARZAI SUPPORTERS PUSHED FOR SECOND ROUND  
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¶12. (S) Junbesh senior leadership told the Ambassador on  
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November 2 that they had wanted Karzai to go to a second round to increase his legitimacy, and so Afghanistan could benefit from a "strong government." (Comment: Junbesh, as well as Hezb-e-Islami, do not want competition for cabinet positions, and therefore prefer the second round versus a deal with Abdullah. End Comment.) Later, Deputy Junbesh Chairman MP Saee returned from a meeting at the Palace, and told us that Karzai held a meeting with jihadi and mujahadeen leaders the morning of November 2, and five of eight voted to have the IEC announce that Karzai was the election winner (Afghanistan Islamic Invitation Party leader Sayyaf, Hezb-e-Islami branch leader Sabawoon, Ulema Council Head Shinwari, Afghan Millat Leader and Finance Minister Ahadi, and Energy Minister Ismael Khan voted to end the elections now, while Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan Arghandewal, Hezb-e-Wahdat leader Akbari and Junbesh Deputy Chairman Sayee voted to go to a second round).

¶13. (S) The Lawyers' Union members met at the Intercontinental Hotel to discuss the 'legitimacy of the runoff election'. It had the feel a pre-planned Karzai pep-rally than a serious, professional debate over the legal necessity of a second round. President Karzai's office issued invitations to the event, billing it as a press conference, but Karzai himself did not appear. Approximately

275 people attended and there was both local and international media coverage. The speakers we heard were unanimous in their consensus that the international community is to blame for the current election crisis and that a second round should go forward to establish that the President has a true mandate from the people.

EIKENBERRY